

£COLOMBIA

@CHILDREN AND MINORS: VICTIMS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

According to the Institute of Legal Medicine, 1504 people under 18 were shot in Colombia in 1992. Twenty-five more were stabbed. 876 victims were under 14 years. And there were 222 homicide victims under four years. This means that four children under school age are killed every week in the country.

Article from Cambio 16 entitled "The country which kills children" 5 July 1993.

INTRODUCTION

Colombia has one of the highest murder rates in the world; 28,237 murders were officially recorded in 1992, of which 102 incidents were recorded as massacres in which four or more people died. The violence has many causes and a variety of actors. Only a relatively small percentage of the killings are believed to be politically motivated, some 15% according to the Presidential Human Rights Adviser. Statistics produced by non-governmental organizations give a similar picture. According to the non-governmental organization Andean Commission of Jurists (Colombia Section), over the past five years a daily average of 10 people are killed in politically motivated violence in Colombia. In their efforts to defeat several guerrilla organizations, the Colombian armed forces and their paramilitary allies have increasingly resorted to gross and systematic human rights violations. In recent years, several thousands of people have been extrajudicially executed and hundreds more have "disappeared" after detention. Armed opposition groups have contributed to the spiral of political violence by frequent violations of the principles of international humanitarian law.

Children and young people are frequent victims of human rights abuses: a minority because they are themselves politically active; others because of the political activity of their parents or other relatives and others simply because civilians - including children - living in areas where guerrilla forces are active are automatically considered by the armed forces to be guerrilla supporters or sympathizers. Moreover, according to a recent study produced by the Colombian Ministry of Health, in 1992 over 50,000 children were orphaned as a result of the murder of one or both their parents. However, the study did not indicate how many children had been orphaned as a result of political violence.

Tens of thousands more children have had to flee their homes because of the civil conflict. They have joined the swelling ranks of Colombia's internally displaced eking out a precarious living in shanty towns surrounding the major cities where they may become targets of "death squads". In the cities, children and young people on the margins of society are potential targets because they are perceived by some sectors to be a threat to society. Thousands of street children, many of whom lead a life of petty crime, drug abuse and prostitution, live in permanent fear of attack.

Amnesty International has received growing numbers of reports of killings of "social undesirables" (*desechables sociales*) - children and adults - in so-called social cleansing operations (*operaciones de limpieza social*). Human rights organizations in Colombia recorded 505 "social cleansing" murders in 1992; more than fifty of the victims were under 18 years of age. The majority of such murders are attributed to so-called "death squads" linked to the national police. A 28-year-old vagrant who has lived on

Children in Colombiathrough the streets of Bogotá since he was
c/ David Browne/Parachute PicturesEleven said:

"We live under permanent threat. But not only us: the destitute, the "hippies", the artisans, they too are threatened. Every day we ask ourselves if we will live to see tomorrow". Other young people are targeted merely for living in poor neighbourhoods of large cities such as Medellín and Bogotá, where drugs- related crime has severely exacerbated an already violent climate.

The incidents described below illustrate the range of abuses faced by young people in Colombia. Many occurred in areas where guerrilla groups have been active and where there has been a corresponding level of children in Colombia counter-insurgency operations by security forces.

Typical also has been the creation in such areas of paramilitary groups, often under the auspices of the security forces. While the Colombian authorities declared such groups illegal, there is strong evidence that they continue to operate with the collaboration or cooperation of the Colombian army. In this context, entire families appear to have been singled out by the security forces and/or paramilitary agents. While it is not always possible to say that the children have been deliberate targets, they have been caught up in military or police operations against their parents or relatives. Such operations have paid scant regard for the safety of any children and are often carried out in places and at times when children are almost certain to be present. Clearly such a high level of repression against entire families is designed in part to discourage others from criticizing or denouncing illegal activities by government agents. Usually the security forces attempt to justify the crimes by claiming that the victims were supporters or sympathisers of guerrillas and the military often prepare press statements to this effect after the event. However, in case after case it has emerged that those killed were innocent civilians who had taken no part in the conflict.

RIOFRIO MASSACRE

Lucelly Colorado de Ladino (f) 16

Dora Estela Gaviria Ladino (f) 15

Luz Edelsi Tusarma (f) 16

John Fredy Molina (m) 16.

The four young people named above were among thirteen people killed during a military operation in October 1993 in the farming community of El Bosque, municipality of Riofrío, Valle de Cauca department. The thirteen victims, twelve of them from two families, were dragged from their homes, tortured and then shot by armed men under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Luis Felipe Becerra Bohórquez, commander of the Palacé Battalion based in Buga.

According to witnesses, men in combat fatigued, some wearing police uniforms and some wearing balaclavas, spread out through the community of El Bosque early in the morning of 5 October 1993. Some went to the house of the Ladino family whilst others went to the Molina family home. Seven members of the Ladino family, aged between 15 and 75 years, were seized by the armed men who then proceeded to torture them. Several of the women, including the three named above, were raped before being shot. Lucelly Colorada de Ladino had a thirty day old baby when she was killed. The body of sixteen-year-old Luz Edelsi Tusarma was found with a pair of binoculars around her neck and a grenade by her hand which eye-witnesses said soldiers had placed there to make it appear she was a guerrilla fighter. One witness described how she was found: "She had bruises all over her face from the beating they had given her". Five members of the Molina family, including 16-year-old John Fredy Molina, were taken from their homes to the school house where they were beaten and interrogated. Later they were taken to an empty house in the village where they were shot dead.

Military commanders immediately claimed the thirteen people were "guerrillas killed in combat". However, this version was rejected by neighbours, local authorities and judicial investigators. *"Neither my husband, nor my parents-in-law, nor my neighbours were guerrillas; they were all peasant farmers dedicated to their work"*, said the wife of one of the victims. Local parish priests and the mayor of Riofrío publicly stated that the Ladino and Molina families were well known to be hard working, Christian peasant farmers who had lived in the area for forty years.

Following the Riofrío massacre the government announced that Lieutenant Colonel Becerra had been given an honourable discharge from the army. This measure carries no sanction and seems designed merely to placate national and international concern.

The massacre left two babies and several children orphaned and had a devastating impact on the community. At least 18 of the 22 resident families fled the community in the wake of the massacre; their homes have since been ransacked.

Luís Carlos Velez Garzon

Luís Carlos Vélez Garzón was the eight-year-old son of Carlos Julian Vélez, a deputy in the departmental assembly for the *Unión Patriótica* (Patriotic Union). He was killed on 14 September 1991, together with his father, mother María Norma Garzón and uncle Dumas Elkin Rodríguez. According to reports, the family was returning to their home in Mesetas, Meta department late on 14 September 1991 from their *finca* (small farm) belonging to Luís Carlos' grandfather, where they had been working during the day. The vehicle was intercepted by a group of heavily armed men. Carlos Vélez was first attacked with a hand grenade and then shot in the head as he lay wounded. The bodies of the two other adults were found some hundred meters from the vehicle. Neighbours reported hearing cries for help from eight-year-old Luís Carlos Vélez. He had been wounded in the stomach. However, they were at first too scared to help him, fearing that they too would be killed. When they finally approached the scene of the attack three hours later, Luís Carlos was dead.

Carlos Julian Vélez had survived an earlier attempt on his life on 18 March 1991 during which he and two other supporters of the UP were seriously wounded. An investigation into the killings was opened and one person believed to be implicated is held in the prison at Villavicencio. However, those responsible for planning and ordering the killings have not been detained nor brought to justice.

In October 1992 the *Defensor del Pueblo*, (Advocate for the People), published a report on political killings of members of two legal political groups in Colombia, the *Unión Patriótica* and *Esperanza Paz y Libertad* (Hope Peace and Freedom). It singles out massacres as one of the most horrifying forms of violence perpetrated against Colombians not merely because of the killings themselves but also because the incidents were frequently announced in advance. Where investigations did take place, they were marked by irregularities which hindered their progress and prevented their findings from being conclusive. Despite often voluminous evidence, few investigations have led to the identification of those responsible for the human rights violations and an even smaller number have resulted in prosecutions. Worse still, even where the individuals responsible have been identified and arrest warrants issued, these have not been implemented or, if they have, legal proceedings have not been concluded. This failure to bring those responsible to justice has created a climate of impunity which is all-pervasive. It is one of the root causes for the continuing high level of human rights abuses in Colombia.

Ayure Quintero family

On 13th May 1992 at about 4 pm in Vereda (hamlet) Santander, municipality of La Uribe, Meta department, members of the Army's *Brigada Móvil No 1* (Mobile Brigade No 1) attacked the home of the Ayure family where there were five children, their mother and two suspected members of the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* - Revolutionary

Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla group. During the course of the attack, Marta Cecilia Ayure Quintero, aged 11 and the two FARC suspects were killed. The house was destroyed. Sra. Matilde Quintero, aged 45 and Sandra Milena Ayure Quintero aged 6, were injured and taken by military helicopter to the Bogotá military hospital. There, they were held in incommunicado detention until a petition for *habeas corpus* was presented on their behalf and the International Committee of the Red Cross intervened. They were then transferred to the Hospital San Ignacio which is run by the Jesuits. Three other children Graciela aged 13, Yaneth aged 9 and Ismenia aged 2 were taken to the *Batallón 21 Vargas* (21 Vargas Army Battalion) in Granada, Meta department. The Army also removed the body of Marta Cecilia Ayure and it is believed that she was illegally buried in Granada.

The three children were held in the *Batallón 21 Vargas* for thirteen days when they were transferred to the *Hogar Infantil Rafael Uribe* (Rafael Uribe Children's Home) in La Uribe, Meta department. On 3 June 1992 the children's father, Eusebio Ayure Bolaños asked the regional director of the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) for assistance to enable the children to join the rest of the family in Bogotá. The next day, Sra. Matilde Quintero, who was still in hospital in Bogotá, received a telephone call informing her that nuns had taken her daughters to Bogotá. This contradicted information which had been given earlier by a spokesman of the ICBF to the children's father, lawyer and Dr. Mariana Escobar (of the *Consejería Presidencial* - Presidential advisory body) that the girls were still at the Uribe children's home. However, as at 4 June 1992 the children were not at the children's home. Eventually, the children were reunited with their father in Bogotá. However, Sr. Ayure is still seeking the location and exhumation of Marta Cecilia's body.

Luís Ernesto Ascanio

Fifteen year old Luís Ernesto Ascanio "disappeared" on 26 January 1993 whilst on his way from the farm where he worked in the Vereda (hamlet) Mesa Rica in the Norte de Santander department to his parents' farm. He had begun his journey after learning that the farm was being occupied by personnel from the Army *Brigada Móvil No. 2* (Mobile Brigade No 2) who were apparently looking for his father, Abrahan Ascanio. He was concerned for the safety of his relatives. The farm was apparently occupied for about nine days until 1 February during which time his mother, young brothers and sisters were held hostage, unable to leave or to receive visitors.

The whereabouts of Luís Ernesto Ascanio remained unknown until 21/22 May 1993 when the *Oficina de Investigaciones Especiales de la Procuraduría General* (Special Investigations Office of the Procurator General) in conjunction with the *Juzgado Penal Militar* (Military Penal Court) undertook 15 exhumations of unidentified bodies at the Central Cemetery in Ocaña, Norte de Santander. Relatives identified the body of Luís Ernesto Ascanio from his underclothes and a belt. The body had been dressed in military fatigues. Several other civilians from the area "disappeared" after detention by Mobile Brigade soldiers

around the same time. Their bodies were subsequently handed over to civilian authorities by the army who claimed they had been "killed in combat".

Marcos Ortiz González.

Seventeen-year-old Marcos Ortiz González was killed, together with Epiménio Rodríguez Guzmán, a community leader, on 28 February 1993. Two others, Cecilia Rusinque and Samuel Zambrano were wounded during the same incident in San Juan de Arama, Meta department when, according to reports, approximately 50 members of the *Batallón 21 Vargas* 21 Vargas Battalion entered a public building in the community of Miraflores in San Juan de Arama and opened fire on those inside. Some, including Marcos Ortiz, were killed instantly; others were wounded, some died later.

CHILDREN THREATENED BY THE ARMY

Pérez Family:

Four children aged between nine and 17 were threatened with death by army officers seeking to locate their father who had denounced being tortured. In November 1993 Ramón Alirio Pérez Vargas was arrested with two other men by soldiers from the Maza Battalion in Cúcuta, North Santander department. All three men were taken to a rural area on the outskirts of the city and tortured for several hours. One of the men died under torture. Ramón Pérez suffered severe injuries to his ears, mouth and testicles. He was released without charge two days later on the condition that he remained silent about his ordeal and agreed to work for military intelligence. As soon as he was released, however, he denounced the arbitrary arrest, torture and the death of one of the detainees to local civilian authorities and human rights officials and identified the army officer responsible. Following his denunciation Ramón Pérez received repeated threats and went into hiding. Since then his four children, Leilis Johnaid Pérez (f) aged 17, Roger Farid Pérez (m), aged 15, Jason Alirio Pérez, aged 12 and Nicole Saíd Pérez (f), aged 9, have all been threatened. The army lieutenant allegedly responsible for the torture and death in custody and other army personnel have threatened to kill the four children unless Ramón Pérez retracts his denunciation.

Ever Ariza, Fernando Ortega y John Fredy Ortega

Children who witness human rights violations by the security forces are also at risk of reprisal. Thirteen-year-old Ever Ariza, 10-year-old Fernando Ortega and 8-year-old Jon Fredy Ortega were with three adults, including Fernando and Jon's mother, when the three adults were arrested by troops from the army's Mobile Brigade No 2 in October 1993 in La Gabarra, municipality of Tibú, North Santander department. The bodies of the three adults, Angel de Jesús Ariza, Alvaro Blanco and Edilia Ortega (f), showing signs of severe torture, were dumped

by the army later that day on the doorstep of the Bishop's Residence in Tibú where they remained for several hours. A few days after the murders, the same soldiers returned to the village searching for the three children who, they said, were the only witnesses to the arrest. Relatives and members of the community fear for the safety of the three children.

Colombian Child
c. David Browne/Parachute Pictures

"SOCIAL CLEANSING"

A threat in the form of invitation to funerals of street children, Bogota in August 1993
 c. Miguel Díaz/El Tiempo

The murder of people designated "socially undesirable", including street children, vagrants and suspected delinquents, has become endemic in Colombia's cities and towns. Murder operations directed against these people are routinely termed "social cleansing operations" and are generally attributed to shadowy "death squads". Statistics in this area are notoriously difficult as many go unrecorded but one estimate suggests that between 1988 and 1992 at least 1,900 such people were killed. Frequently, the bodies of the victims bore signs of torture or had been mutilated. In most cases the assassins remain unknown. Many bodies are never identified and investigations, although routinely opened, frequently lead nowhere. However, several cases have produced evidence that the "death squads" were drawn from the security forces, particularly the National Police, and were often supported by local traders. Sometimes "death squads" publicly announce that they are starting "clean-up" operations. In August 1993 posters appeared in the centre of Bogotá announcing the extermination of "delinquents". Bearing a black cross, the posters invited the public in the name of "industrialists, shopkeepers and civic organizations" to attend the funerals of the "delinquents" who operated in the city centre.

Cali Street Gang Project

In September 1993 a senior council official in the city of Cali in south-west Colombia accused the police of the murder of 12 youths in a three-month period. The Council's Peace Adviser described the killings as an attempt to undermine a council initiative to disarm and rehabilitate members of juvenile street gangs in the city. The Street Gang Project, *Operación Pandilla*, was set up in May 1993 under the auspices of Cali city council and the *Consejería para el Desarrollo, la Seguridad y la Paz* (Council for Peace, Security and Development). The project had succeeded in persuading more than 200 child members of street gangs to hand over their weapons and join rehabilitation programs. The Cali Peace Adviser reported that he had received death threats after publicly blaming the police for killing 12 of the youths who had joined the project.

Medellín

Community leaders, students and unemployed youths in shanty towns have frequently been threatened and killed by death squads. In many cases the killings appeared to be in direct reprisal for attacks on police agents. In Medellín for example young people are often recruited by drug traffickers as contract killers. Their targets are police personnel. In reprisal police enter poor neighbourhoods and kill young people indiscriminately.

Only hours after two police agents were shot dead in the centre of Medellín in November 1992, twelve masked men with automatic rifles entered the poor neighbourhood of Villatina on the outskirts of Medellín and shot nine young people dead: 15-year old Jovanny Vallejo Restepo, 17-year-old Oscar Andrés Ortíz Toro, 17-year-old Ricardo Alexander

Mauricio Ramírez Hernández, 17-year-old Marlon Alberto Alvarez, 24-year-old Mauricio Ramírez Higueta, 17-year-old Yonny Alexander

Cardona, 16-year-old Angel Alberto Barón Miranda, 8-year-old Geovanny Alberto Valero and an 8-year-old girl, Johana Mazo Ramírez. Six of the victims were killed when the gunmen fired indiscriminately at customers in a cafe. Johana Mazo Ramírez, who had a leg in plaster, was sitting outside a shop opposite the cafe, together with two of the victims, witnessed the attack on the young people. The assailants then crossed the road and fired at the three witnesses at point-blank range. Seven of the victims were members of a young people's Christian organization, *Caminantes del Futuro* (Builders of the Future).

John Albert Muñeton Pulgarin (17)

Marta Isabel Tamayo Gil (16)

Astrid Janeth Muneton Pulgarin (18).

John Albert Muñeton was reportedly arrested at about 3pm on 7 November 1992 in the Aranjuez district of Medellín by uniformed police agents on motorcycles. He was taken to the Manrique police station and accused of attacking a police patrol. On 8 November John Muñeton was transferred to the police intelligence unit, F2, who later transferred him to the North Police Station for minors. At 5pm he gave a sworn statement before a judge who immediately ordered his release for lack of evidence against him. On his release at 7.45pm, he left the police station with his mother, Luiz Miriam Pulgarín Jaramillo, his sister Astrid Yaneth Muñeton Pulgarín and his girlfriend Marta Isabel Tamayo Gil. Eyewitnesses saw all four boarding a yellow taxi. They have not been seen since. Local human rights groups have denounced their "disappearance" to the *Procuraduría Regional* - Regional Procurator's Office.

Cúcuta

In December 1991, eight common graves containing seventeen bodies were found on the outskirts of the town of Cúcuta, which straddles the border with Venezuela in northern Colombia. All of the bodies presented signs of torture and some had been mutilated apparently to prevent identification. Almost immediately local police authorities declared that the crimes were related to a drug-trafficking ring operating in Venezuela and Colombia with links to mafia organizations in Italy. Among the victims were 16-year-old Nohelia Santiago Lozano, her sister Nelsy Durán Lozano and Nelsy's boyfriend Manuel Peña Garzón who had been visiting Cúcuta to buy clothes. The body of lawyer Norha Luz Grass García who had "disappeared" two months before was found together with the body of her chauffeur Willian Bermúdez Carvajal. Many of the bodies remained unidentified and the motive for the killings was not clear. However, one of the victims whose body was found in the common grave, José de Jesus Olarte was a witness in the arrest and "disappearance" by F-2 police intelligence agents of truck driver Pedro Antonio Granados in November 1991. José de Jesus Olarte was himself abducted and "disappeared", together with two other witnesses, José Florez and Jesus Peña before they could testify in the investigation into the "disappearance" of Pedro Granados.

In some instances the motives for the killings appear to be virtually non-existent.

Roison Mora Rubiano

On 22 June 1993 16 year-old Roison Mora Rubiano, his brother Jimmy Roberto, aged 19, and a friend called Harold left the construction site where they worked in the Bosa district of Bogotá and boarded a bus to return home. The bus was diverted from its normal route so the three got off and walked. At approximately 5.45 pm the three youths stopped on a bridge on the Avenida Boyacá where it crosses over the Avenida Ciudad Bolívar and dropped stones on to buses passing underneath. One of the buses contained uniformed army officers. Roison Mora apparently shouted to his brother and friend to run or risk a beating. The youths ran a short distance and then stopped. One of them looked behind and realised that two armed soldiers had left the bus and were chasing them. All three youths started running from the pursuing soldiers. A van driver reports that he was flagged down by two men in army uniforms carrying guns, whom he put down on the bridge. A witness reports that he saw the soldiers chase Roison Mora and the other two and heard the sound of gunfire for a period of four or five minutes. He thought the soldiers must be firing into the air. Then the witness saw the soldiers return and get into a bus travelling north. On hearing the gunfire behind them Jimmy Roberto and Harold say that they became more afraid and threw themselves to the ground for

protection. They saw Roison Mora fall and Jimmy thought he had also thrown himself to the ground for protection. Harold said, "Roison is dead". He had been shot in the back of the head.

A few moments later a police patrol arrived in the area to deal with the incident which they said involved a wounded boy. This was the moment when the witness realised the soldiers had not been firing in the air. Roison Mora was still alive. A total of eight police patrols from different police stations attended the scene. Roison Mora was taken to the hospital in Meissen where he died later. When his parents went to the hospital at 8pm that day to visit their son, they were met en route by unknown men who claimed to be relatives. Later the two men admitted they were from the Army Intelligence Service - B2.

The two soldiers responsible for the killing have not been identified.

María de los Angeles Parra Bernal

Thirteen year old María de los Angeles Parra Bernal was killed when policeman Luís Eduardo Ramírez interrupted a children's party and fired his revolver at María de los Angeles when she refused to go out dancing with him. According to reports, the brother of the killer then proceeded to carry the girl's body out of the house and to place it on the pavement outside. He then returned to the house and told the children assembled at the birthday party, "Nothing has happened here". The family has received threats since their daughter's death on an almost daily basis.

Sandra Catalina Vázquez Guzmán

Public opinion in Colombia was outraged in March 1993 when reports appeared in the press of the rape and killing of a ten year old girl, Sandra Catalina Vázquez Guzmán, inside a Bogotá police station. The girl had gone to the police station to look for her father, a police officer. She was found dead in a lavatory on the third floor of the III Police Station. Initial statements from the Commander of the Bogotá police, Oscar Peláez Carmona stated that the girl had been killed by her father on 28 February 1993. A disciplinary investigation resulted in the dismissal from the police of the Commander of the III Police Station, the Deputy Commander, a police lieutenant, sergeant and three policemen for negligence or acts of omission in allowing the girl to enter the police station. The child's father is also facing dismissal from the police on the grounds of accumulation of sanctions (*acumulación de sanciones*). The ruling has to be ratified by the Director of Police, General Miguel Angel Gómez Padilla in order to take effect. A criminal investigation to determine responsibility for the rape and killing is continuing.

The incident prompted a national debate on the role of the police and the creation of a commission on police reform. Whether the reforms will prove any more effective than those introduced in February 1992 remains to be seen.

TORTURE

Marcela Becerra Pinzon (age 2)

Luís Fernando Martínez, Sonebia Pinzón and her two year-old daughter, Marcela Becerra Pinzón, were tortured at their home in Sabaneta, Santander department, on 7 November 1992 by members of the armed forces' *Brigada Móvil No 2* (Mobile Brigade No. 2).

According to Luís Fernando Martínez and Sonebia Pinzón's testimonies, the family were asleep in bed when, at approximately 1.30 am, they were woken up by five members of the *Brigada Móvil No 2*, which was temporarily based at the nearby police station of Sabaneta. The soldiers reportedly hammered on the door, demanding to be admitted and claiming that they had come to search for weapons which they believed were hidden there. When Luís Fernando Martínez opened the door, one of the soldiers entered and held a gun to his chest, while the other four went to the room where Sonebia Pinzón and her children were sleeping. They attacked Sonebia Pinzón, attempting to rape her. When Luís Fernando Martínez pleaded with the soldiers to leave her alone, the soldiers reportedly threatened to kill him if Sonebia Pinzón did not submit to them. The soldier who was holding a gun to Luís Fernando Martínez' chest took him to the door of the house and fired a shot into the air. At this, two of the soldiers left the house and went in the direction of the army base. The remaining two soldiers threatened to take Luís Fernando Martínez to the base and the one guarding him began to lead him in that direction, insulting and threatening him. On the way, Luís Fernando Martínez passed his mother's house and shouted out that he was being detained. The soldier reportedly punched him and threatened to shoot him. His repeated cries for help brought his mother out and as a result of her pleading he was allowed to go with her into her home. The soldier threatened him, saying that if he returned to his own house he would be shot.

According to Sonebia Pinzón's statement, one of the two soldiers remaining in the house took her, together with her three year-old boy, to the patio. There she was raped, against threats that Luís Fernando Martínez would be killed if she did not submit. She states the soldier appeared to be under the influence of drugs or drink. Sonebia Pinzón heard the screams of her two year-old daughter, who was in another room with her 8-month-old baby, but was prevented from going to her. She states that she was then raped again, by the soldier who had taken Luís Fernando Martínez away and later returned to the house. When the two soldiers returned to the child's room to look for a mislaid pistol, Sonebia Pinzón followed them and found her two year-old daughter Marcela Becerra Pinzón

semi-conscious and bleeding. She had been raped by the remaining soldier, who had fallen asleep on the child's bed.

A medical examination of Marcela Becerra Pinzón was carried out and the torture and ill-treatment of the family was denounced to local and regional authorities, including the *personería* (ombudsman) of Sabana de Torres and the *Procurador* (Regional Procurator) of Bucaramanga.

In May 1993, following a massive international response initiated by Amnesty International, the Colombian Presidential Adviser on Human Rights told the organization he had received information from the Ministry of Defence that preliminary investigations into the case had established that the soldiers had been formally charged with violent sexual assault, abusive sexual assault against a defenceless individual, rape and conspiracy to commit a crime. Four soldiers from the army's counter-guerrilla forces Battalion No. 18 "Cimarrones" attached to the *Brigada Móvil No 2* were in military detention, later to be transferred to the civilian prison in Barrancabermeja. No further information has been received about the investigation.

Rodríguez Family

Luis Francisco Rodríguez, aged 53, lives in the Municipality of Puerto Rico in the department of Meta, where he owns a small farm. On 4 August 1993 an army patrol came to the area inquiring about guerrillas. They searched the Rodríguez house, finding four books - one on philosophy, one on political economy, a dictionary and one entitled "Lenin". They also found a 20 calibre rifle part. The army captain in charge of the patrol believed Luis Rodríguez was a guerrilla. The captain swore at him and kicked him and then took him to another location where another soldier beat him on the arm with a rifle, knocked him to the ground and kicked him again. He still bears evidence of the kicking on his back, stomach and chest. Then he was beaten with a gun and with the machete he was carrying. He was grabbed by the hair and beaten against the ground and punched in the face. He was told to confess that he helped the guerrillas. His nose was covered with tape, a towel placed over his face and water put in his mouth until he choked. Then they placed the towel around his neck and tied him up with rope and he was taken some 150 meters further from the house where there was a large tree. The rope was thrown over a branch and they began to pull it up until only the tips of his toes were on the ground. They did this four times, questioning him between times about the guerrilla. Then they made him lie on the ground, face up and they made him open his mouth. They put the barrel of the gun into his mouth and pushed it in. Then they withdrew it, telling him to confess or they would fire the gun. This happened four times. Luis Rodríguez said he was not going to confess to something he did not know anything about.

Meanwhile his son Alirio Rodríguez, aged 15, was also being tortured. They tied him up and held him under water until he choked. Then they pulled him out and said that they would take him to the guerrillas. He was told to confess that his father took food to the guerrillas and that he was in charge of the militias. Alirio denied this and the soldiers held him

under water again. This lasted about two hours. Meanwhile they told Marina Arce, Luis Rodríguez's pregnant wife, that they would put a bomb in the house to get rid of them, because they helped the guerrillas by giving them food. They said they hoped Marina Arce would miscarry, just as one of the guerrillas they had captured had. They did not allow Marina Arce to prepare lunch for the two other children Rovison (aged 8 years) and Leonardo Rodríguez (aged 6 years). These two young children were also questioned about the guerrillas.

At approximately 12 midday, Alirio and his father were given their four books back and made to accompany the soldiers for about an hour into the mountains. At about 4 pm the captain said he was going to release them but that he would burn the books. The captain told the lieutenant to prepare a note for Alirio and his father to sign stating that they had been well treated. At first they refused and they were told that if they did not sign, they would not be released. They did eventually sign the paper. Later they denounced their treatment to human rights groups.

CHILDREN CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

There have also been instances where children and young people have been caught in the crossfire between guerrilla groups and the security forces. Both the army and the guerrillas have failed to abide by international humanitarian law to protect the physical integrity of non-combatant civilians in conflict areas. The practice adopted by both the army and the guerrillas of occupying local health centres or rural schools has led to serious incidents, resulting in injury and death.

In March 1992 counter-insurgency soldiers attached to the Numancia Battalion attacked a school in the rural community of La Paramillo, Cauca department which had been occupied as a temporary base by EPL guerrillas. Twenty-two primary school children were in the building with their teacher when the army opened fire. Eight-year-old Duván Muñoz Gallardo and a girl called Mónica died in the twenty minute confrontation and three other children were injured. Duván Muñoz was hit by a bullet in the chest as he ran to take cover in the corner of the schoolroom. After he was hit the teacher made the children hide under beds but three were injured by shrapnel from grenades thrown by the soldiers. Surviving children later said that when they called for help the soldiers first shouted back "Eat shit you cowards; go ask your mothers for help" (*coman mierda, pida auxilio a su mamá, gran hijueputas cabrones*). When the children continued to call for help the soldiers stopped firing and agreed to allow them to leave the building. However the children said that as they came through the front

door with their teacher they had to roll down an embankment to escape because the army opened fire again.

In another incident at 9 am on 12 August 1993 in the Siberio hamlet, Orito municipality, Putamayo department, six members of the same family ranging in ages from 6 to 15 years were killed by a grenade found in the place the children used to play in. The children had apparently picked up the grenade and were trying to disarm it when it exploded. Those killed were: Roger Mario Yela Rengifo, aged 16; Waimen Antonio Yela Rengifo aged 14; Jhon Keni Yela Rengifo aged 8; Yelma Lucia Yela Rengifo aged 6; Olga Yami González Rengifo aged 8; Yásmín González Rengifo aged 6. One boy, Humberto Yela Rengifo aged 12 who was standing apart from the group survived but sustained serious injuries from the explosion. The army has stated that the grenade was of a type no longer used by them and it is believed that it may have been abandoned by a guerrilla group which had staged an attack some nine months earlier on the *Batería Churuyaco* belonging to Ecopetrol.

As well as being caught in the cross-fire, civilians have been killed and injured by landmines laid by guerrilla organizations or in attacks against military objectives. In February 1992 the National Liberation Army, (ELN), *Ejército Nacional de Liberación*, attacked an army patrol on the outskirts of San Vicente de Chucurí, Santander department. A bomb placed by the roadside was detonated by remote control as the patrol passed by. A group of children leaving school were caught in the blast. Two seven-year-old boys, Edison Alberto García Nova and René Armando Díaz Luna were killed and several other

Edison Alberto García Nova Children were injured. The attack was later admitted by the ELN who "regretted" the civilian casualties

c. Vanguardia Liberal

The body of Rene Armando Dias Luna
c. Vanguardia Liberal

STEPS TO PROTECT CHILDREN

Amnesty International recommends that the Colombian Government implement the following steps to ensure protection of children:

- The Colombian Government should ensure that children should receive the full protection of the law.
- All instances of threats and human rights violations against children must be fully investigated by civilian courts and the perpetrators brought to justice.
- The Colombian Government should take steps to end the harassment, threats and intimidation against children.
- Within the context of conflict between guerrillas and state security forces, measures should be taken to ensure that civilians, particularly children, are not caught in the crossfire or injured by landmines.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Amnesty International is campaigning to increase international awareness of the human rights situation in Colombia and mobilize people to act. Individuals and groups around the world can make a difference and support children in Colombia.

Help publicize the reality of Colombia

Contact the Amnesty International office in your country and ask how you can help. You may be able to take part in public events, petitions, appeals, lobbying and messages of support for the peoples of Colombia.

Tell others about Colombia, distribute Amnesty International's publications and raise the issue of human rights in Colombia with any groups or organizations of which you are a member. Write letters or articles for newspapers or magazines.